

RATIONALE FOR MISSOURI WATERFOWL SEASON TIMING

In Missouri, hunting prospects are determined by (in order of importance) 1) wetland habitat conditions, 2) weather, 3) migration timing, and lastly 4) size of the fall flight. Unfortunately, the most important variables are the least predictable. Recommending the specific waterfowl seasons for Missouri involves hitting a “moving target” of migrations, weather, habitat conditions, and hunters’ preferences. Undoubtedly, these variables again will play important roles in determining when and where waterfowling opportunities will occur in 2006. Sixty-day seasons for ducks in recent years have provided much more flexibility in season setting because a wide range of migrations and weather can be included within a 2-month season. Additionally, 3 zones allow for a season tailored to the diverse hunting styles from North to South Missouri. We prepared a complete review of the long-term information used to recommend seasons for a series of zoning workshops held in spring 2006. This summary can be found on the Department’s website at:

http://www.mdc.mo.gov/documents/hunt/wtrfowl/zone_report/intro.pdf

Duck Season Data for Missouri:

Considerable information is utilized each year when duck season dates are recommended for Missouri. Long-term trends of weather, migrations, and populations are the basis for duck season timing. **Weather** data, from selected weather reporting stations, include the temperature and precipitation affecting hunting conditions during September to January. **Migrations** of ducks have been reported on Missouri Department of Conservation wetland areas since 1948. Information about early-migrant dabbling ducks (teal, wigeon, pintails, etc.) and mallards both are considered when seasons are recommended. **Population** data from Department areas also are considered. These data, for both mallards and early-migrant dabblers, are the result of at least biweekly surveys conducted on each area since 1970. **Mallard band recovery** data provide a primary basis for information on the distribution of mallard harvest by location and date. Mallards are used because of their importance to Missouri hunters, annually accounting for 50%-70% of the statewide harvest. **Harvest** information from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s and the Missouri Department of Conservation’s post-season harvest surveys provide a means to consider harvest levels for groups of years with similar zone/split season configurations.

The Role of Hunters:

Waterfowl hunters play a critical role in annual efforts to manage migratory birds. Bands reported by hunters and responses to surveys represent the primary sources of information about harvest and hunter attitudes that are used each year to manage these resources and to recommend hunting seasons that accommodate hunting preferences.

Accurate and precise harvest and hunter estimates require that a complete and representative sampling frame is available. Hunters can help by prompting license vendors to ask and record information about their previous year’s hunting activity. The questions asked by vendors are not designed to estimate harvest; they are too general to be used for specific harvest data. Instead,

the questions asked of hunters are used only to develop the harvest survey that is conducted after the season.

Bands that are recovered and reported by hunters are the source of information about survival and harvest rates, migration, and harvest derivation and distribution. A toll-free telephone number (1-800-327-2263) and website (www.pwrc.usgs.gov/bbl) now provide easy methods for hunters to report bands. Following the phone report (hunters do not have to send in the band), hunters will be sent a certificate with specific information about the harvested bird's banding location, date, and age when banded.

Each year we use current information from waterfowl harvest surveys in addition to hunter contacts through direct correspondence to gauge whether season timing is consistent with hunter attitudes about preferred dates to hunt. This year about 5,500 hunters received a Waterfowl Post-Season Harvest Survey and 11,000 hunters, a Snow Goose Post-Season Harvest Survey. We randomly select participants for each of the surveys to ensure that we receive the opinions of all types of hunters. In addition, we held nine workshops around the state to discuss season dates and zone boundaries and regularly meet with waterfowl groups including Ducks Unlimited, the Missouri Waterfowl Association, and the Mississippi Valley Duck Hunters Association.

